TL 1744

EASTTIMOR

A first impression of what I had to expect in Easttimor I already got in the plane to Dili. The other passengers kept staring at me - the only tourist from abroad in the plane - curious, and partly surprised, but nobody at all talked to me; something like that had never happened to me before in Indonesia, because usually the Indonesians are very talkative.
An explanation for that strange behaviour I should get much later.
The unpleasant feeling I already got at that time became a lot stronger when I arrived in Dili. The atmosphere in the town was like in a graveyard. The mood was very tense, under the surface you always had a strange, unpleasant feeling and you could see that the people were frightened.
In Dili itself it happened very often that people spoke to me - tourists are a very rare view and I haven't seen any other tourist during my sojourn in Easttimor - but most of them turned out to be Javanese, Westtimorese and from other parts of Indonesia, in any case non-Easttimorese.
Much later an Easttimorese told me that most of them were afraid to be seen together with tourists/foreigners, because they knew for sure that they would be interrogated by the military afterwards.
The ones who talked to me nevertheless, tried most of the time to tell me about the Dili-massacre of the 12th November 1991 which was still very traumatic for them.

I don't know in how far the things they told me are true and I just want to reproduce it without any personal comment:
Eyewitnesses told me that at least 200 people died that time, in any case at the repeated firing itself.
But after that especially young people reportedly have been caught in schoolhouses, which were burnt down afterwards.
Besides, they said, a lot of people were drowened in the sea at nighttime.
Consequently the deathrate would be much higher.

All of that was told me only at low voice and after repeatedly looking and turning around, but never on my application.
I just kept listening, because in Easttimor it is 'healthier'and less dangerous not to give any comments yourself on that subject.
And it is also adviceable not to trust anybody very quickly, otherwise you can get a few bad surprises. Ostensible good friends turn out to be informers, sent by the military to supervise tourists.
Unfortunately it happened to me, too, and a so-called friend turned out to be an informer.[All of a sudden knew my whole days timetable - so he had either followed me himself the whole day (during which I never met him) or had gotten his information from a third side.]
He admitted openly, that he had been working as an informer for the military before; right now he wanted to quit, but they obviously wouldn't let him.
He had been trying to talk about the human rights situation and the Dili-massacre, but I don't know out of which reason - if his employers told him to do so, or if it was his own idea.

As soon as I left Dili the tension became less. And I have to say that very rarely I have been received so friendly and helpfull. I never felt like an 'invader'as in 'other parts of Indonesia'; much more I had the impression, that the people were quite happy to see a tourist, because it gave them the feeling not to be forgotten altogether.
They have been helping me whenever they could and were very hospitable, even if they had hardly anything themselves.
Nevertheless they were very shy and left at once when they saw a soldier (that were unfortunately omnipresent).
The ones that have been talking to me, were most of the time either non-Easttimorese or militarymen.

I didn't need a 'surat jalan'to travel, but even at short distances the buses were stopped and checked at least once.
At the 'pos pemeriksaan' were usually soldiers of low ranks, that were polite, but very curious. Usually I was interrogated about half an hour at the checkpoints, while the full bus was waiting in the backround.
I suppose the 'turista' was a nice change in their days.

In the next town I met a man, who told me that a 'friend'of mine in Dili had phoned him and asked him to take care of me. (I had never heard that friends name before and was quite sure that I had never met him.)
He called himself a social-worker, but when I asked him, if he was working for PUSKESMAS, he admitted to belong to ABRI. He said he was sent to check the political situation in Easttimor.
Then he offered me to travel around in Easttimor together with him in his car; a 'good' opportunity to travel cheap and without any problems, even to remote, out-of-the-way places!
I didn't accept this 'great opportunity', neither the offer to sleep in military-barracks (as the only woman!), if I had any problems to find a hotel, and the next day I continued my trip on my own to a remote village further in the east.

After two days travelling I finally arrived very exhausted.
There you feel as if you were at the end of the world, strangers don't get there very often and tourists hardly ever. When I got there I was at once surrounded by heaps of children, that welcomed me with 'turista,turista'-screams.
Though I haven't been there longer than two hours, when already a car appeared and the very same man - together with six other militarymen in civildress, one of them with a machinegun at his back - got out.
He explained, that he had been in the area by coincidence and just wanted to see, if I had arrived without any problems.
Afterwards they started to ask me very direct questions:
- if I wanted to write an article or anything the like after my sojourn in Easttimor;
- if I had already heard about the Dili-massacre and how the reaction in my country had been;
- and finally, if, in my opinion, the Indonesian military had acted very cruel that time.
Not very often before in my life I had been so frightened (nobody really knew where I was at that moment and where to look for me in an emergency) and I wished to be very far away from Easttimor.

Especially, when they urged me together to come back with them (even if they had been asking before a couple of times, if the road was now really save in the darkness).
When I rejected their proposal all the time, one of them got really upset and angry (he was obviously in a higher military rank) and ordered me to come with them at once.
Fortunately I was supported and finally they left without me (after I had promissed to think about it again and to tell them my decision the next day via radio), but an Intel-man stayed, which accompanied me for the next couple of days and just disappeared every now and then to contact his superiours.
After they had left, one Easttimorese that had witnessed the quarrel and supported me bravely, told me, he had been afraid I would join them and could imagine exactly, what would have happened. And then he asked me, if I - in case I had a choice - would have prefered to be raped or to be shot.
I haven't been sleeping very good the following night, especially because I stayed in a place where I was the only guest (the only person anyway); there was no light and no key to lock my room.
I couldn't sleep, always afraid they would come back and force me to come with them. And the shots I heard out of the forest didn't make it any better.
But I had my 'personal guard', who only allowed me to go to the bathroom alone.
And every night you could see the lights of a military boat in the bay.

The next day I had visitors again. Two soldiers in civildress came on a motorbike from the next town, which meant a two-hour-drive on a road that had a really bad surface, full of wholes, and was very lonely.
Explanation: they had been around the area just by coincidence and only wanted to see, if I was alright. (Very fascinating, how many persons came to that remote village just coincidencely in those two days; a place, where usually hardely anybody comes to and where the last tourist had been a couple of months ago!)
They stayed a couple of hours and sort of interrogated me. But I suppose, everything I told them, they had already known beforehand, because in this respect the run of information is working without any problems and, wherever I came to, the police and the military already knew and told me openly, that they had already been expecting me.
They offered me, too, to take me back at once, in case I wanted to make a telephone-call and because the bus-connection was so bad. But the view to go back on a small motorbike (the three of us, with my big backpack and on a bad road) didn't really convince me.

When they had left me, too, an Easttimorese explained - at low voice and after looking around several times - that the military was obviously afraid I could be a journalist, a thought that hadn't come to my mind so far, but it explained a lot.

Yet, the beauty of the landscape and the hospitality of the people was (almost) worth it.

Two days later I left out of my own decision and continued my trip to a town close to the south-coast (after I had reported my departure at the different police- and militarystations, of course).

At my arrival the bus stopped automatically at the police station and I had to get off. There I had to stay in a mess, which was kept by the police, because there was no other possibility to stay for the night.
After I had filled in all the necessary forms once more, one policeman offerd to accomany me, because his office hours were over (another coincidence?!). For the next couple of days he became my constant companion. It was very obvious that I was in an area which wasn't regurded as 'aman'(safe) by the Indonesian military.
In any case he showed me 'everything'; I suppose to prevent, that I could talk to much to Easttimorese people.
But the talks with him were quite interesting, too, because he was talking very openly about his opinion about Easttimor and its people.
He regarded them as dependent children, who still needed guidance and even punishment, in case they drift in the wrong direction, get under the wrong influence.
I don't want to deny, that he had a certain idealism (and even then you have to ask, if the end justifies the means), but very often I got the impression, that a lot of ABRI-members thought they had a certain mission, which reminds me a lot of neo-colonialism.

But despite of all this the people there told me a few quite interesting things: almost every family there is still in contact with the 'orang hutan' (the people, living in the forest) anyhow. Either they have relatives themselves living in the forest, or they supply them with food.
On the way back one of the buspassengers showed me - with a stealthy movement of his hand - some caves, where the guerilla-fighters used to hide. Another one who saw it just smiled - he knew exactly what we had been talking about!
A bit later our bus was stopped by a hoard of uncivilized soldiers, that pointed with their machineguns at us, without any caution and wouldn't let us go, before they had checked the bus and us very carefully.

Finally I came back to Dili. On the same road, where we had been controlled the first time only once, we were now checked three times. Maybe it was just an arbitrary action; yet I had the feeling that they did it out of a special reason, but I didn't have any proves and of course they wouldn't tell me.

As soon as I came back to Dili the feeling of a strong tension was back, too.
When the bus was driving around the town to drop all the passengers, we accidentially passed the graveyard of Santa Cruz. (I had never been there, because a lot of people warned me not to do so. I didn't really want to provoke an interrogation by the military and I couldn't think of any plausible, which means unsuspicious, explanation for my presence at the graveyard.)
Out of the bus I could have a look over the graveyard-wall and what' I saw really shocked me; the inside-wall was still full of bullet-wholes. They obvously hadn't done anything to remove those last (visible) signs of the Dili-incident.

Despite of all I decided to stay a few more days in Easttimor and maybe to visit some more areas. But very soon I changed this decision.
When I had dinner the same evening together with two Easttimorese friends, all of a sudden two men turned up: they admitted openly to be Intel-men and asked at once - in a way that was not very friendly - what my business was in Easttimor. They didn't really believe my explanation, that I was interested in the people and the Easttimorese culture and warned me to be very, very carefull and not to do anything 'wrong', otherwise they would catch me at once and then...
They asked, where I stayed in Dili and said that they would come around in the next days 'to have a talk'with me.
When I returned to my hotel that evening I didn't feel very comfortable and I suppose I would have been departed if there were any possibility.
And really, very early the next morning I heard a heavy knocking at my door and loud voices outside; but when I finally opened the door I only saw the owner of the hotel. She sent me back to my room quickly and said 'quick, go away, bad people have been here, don't let them see you'.
In the afternoon an Indonesian lieutenant visited me, who had already been ringing a couple of times in the last days. He invited me for dinner, fixed a time at once so that I couldn't help but to come. I didn't know with which plausible explanation I could refuse..
But when he hadn't turned up an hour after the fixed time, I went for dinner alone - happy to get off. (That means, I took a taxi, because it is not adviseable to go out on your own in the evening; especially, if you are a woman and foreigner - you incur suspicion very easily.)
A bit later he unfortunately turned up, but he didn't even look at me. Instead he sat down at the next table, where a man in civil dress had his dinner. He seemed to be one of his superiours.
After a couple of minutes he finally came over, gave me a short excuse for his delay, but after that he didn't talk very much more. I had the strange feeling that something was going on in connection with me, but I didn't have any idea, what. Anyway, I felt like a leper.
To complete the unconfortable situation my socalled friend turned up (the one, I mentioned above), but wouldn't sit down at my table, despite of my explicit invitation.
Apparently it was not very adviseable to be seen in public together with me (or with any tourist in general?!), although he hadn't cared about it very much before.
Not much later I had enough, paid and left the restaurant. My military companion didn't even try to hold me back. But my 'friend'came after me at once and very obvious. He just whispered quickly, that he had information (I had never asked for) for me and we should meet in half an hour in front of the hotel Mahkota. That time I still trusted him and so I agreed.
(We hadn't had any time to meet before that day, even if he had turned up in the morning. He hadn't been at the hotel for a couple of days, but he explained, that he had seen me in the bus; so he knew that I was back. And I believed in everything he said!)
But when I arrived at the hotel, I got a big startle. The parking-ground was full of military cars and the forecourt was full of people. I was told that, they had a meeting of judges.

Only now I became suspicious, because he wanted to meet me exactly in this place.
I'm not sure, but in my opinion they try to get simple tourists, that haven't done anything and don't intend to do so, into strange stories, then assert that they have done things they weren't allowed to. But I don't know out of which intention. Maybe to close down Easttimor for tourists again, because they don't pay attention to the 'rules of the game'?! (This is just my very own opinion and I don't have any proof.)

Anyway, I decided to go back to my hotel, because the situation seemed to get too dangerous, but half way back my 'friend'caught up with me and all of a sudden he started to talk:
He used to be a military informer, but now he wanted to quit.
The military on the other hand thought that he was still working for them: therefore they left me in peace, because they thought, I was followed already. And I could absolutely trust him!

But at that point I really didn't know anymore, whom I could believe what. I just knew that I did not trust him anymore.
What I still don't understand is, why he told me all that, if it is not the truth? But how far he told me the truth?

I would have liked to believe and trust him, at least one person, but it was to much of a risk.
Even if he wanted to quit working as an informer, I suppose the military had the means to make him talk, put him under pressure and get the 'information'they wanted.
Then he continued with his 'news', in the middle of the road, until I asked him to stop.
Even just to listen to such things could be fatal for one and now it was me who didn't want to be seen with him anymore. But he still accompanied me back to my hotel and tried for another two hours to convince me of his innocence.
The next morning the lieutenant rang again, but fortunately I wasn't home.

Not very much later I finally left Easttimor, because a couple of people warned me very urgent not to stay any longer, if I didn't want any really bad trouble. Allegedly they (who?) had already collected information about me and didn't believe that I was just a simple tourist.

Yet, after I had left Easttimor, the story was not over yet.
Because in Westtimor I met an Easttimorese, with whom I spent some time.
When I met him again a few weeks later, he told me, that as soon as he had returned he was summoned by the military. They already knew that he had been together with me.
They put a chair on his toe and the man who sat down on it, also asked him what he had to do with me.
When he said I was his girlfriend, they just laughed contemtuous and said:'what should she want from you? When she was still in bili she said she was in love with me!'
I don't know who the soldier was.

This report is just a short summary of my experiences in East Timor. I tried to avoid to make concrete statements in connection with places or dates, or to tell things that could help to find out what time I have been there.
I also didn't mention any names or professions of people I met in public, because I don't want to endanger innocent persons. They would have to fear for their lifes.
But I don't mind to tell more in private.